

The Columbus Dispatch

Entertainment

Storyteller uses talent to encourage youngsters to read

By Ken Gordon, The Columbus Dispatch

Posted Jul 6, 2015 at 12:01 AM

Updated Jul 6, 2015 at 6:50 AM

When children began leaning forward in their chairs, eyes wide, Lyn Ford knew she had succeeded. On a recent weekday, she was telling stories to youngsters at the Dowd Education Center in the Franklinton area. Yet hers was no ordinary story time: Ford is a professional.

When children began leaning forward in their chairs, eyes wide, Lyn Ford knew she had succeeded.

On a recent weekday, she was telling stories to youngsters at the Dowd Education Center in the Franklinton area.

Yet hers was no ordinary story time: Ford is a professional.

As she related folk tales about workaholic ants, scary rabbits and gullible fishermen, she used gestures, different voices and simple instruments to pull her audience into the scenes she described.

“The young ones start to talk to me, and it becomes a conversation,” said the East Side resident, 63. “I love to see folks start to lean forward, make little sounds -- oohs and aahs -- and nods. It lets you know they’re in the story right along with you.

“I don’t even like to call them ‘the audience’; I call them ‘participants.’?”

For “at least” 25 years, Ford said, she has made a living with her trove of tales, many of which she traces to her upbringing and heritage.

She calls herself an “Affrilachian” (an African-American raised in Appalachia), but she also has European and Native American blood.

Her multicultural background helped give her stories to tell, but she needed much more to turn tale-spinning into a career.

“She is one of the best storytellers and finest people I know,” said Frank McGarvey, past chairman of the Storytellers of Central Ohio.

“She works at it very hard -- she practices her stories and researches her stories - and then she adjusts to her audience.

“She is amazing.”

Leaders at the Columbus Metropolitan Library agree.

Ford has remained a staple of the summer reading program for about 20 years, said public-services director Kathy Shahbodaghi.

“Lyn is one of our beloved performers,” she said. “She brings something unique in that she shares folk tales in a manner that’s very engaging for children. She holds the children in the palm of her hand.”

Ford credits much of her success to her childhood in Sharon, Pa., as the daughter of Edward “Jake” Cooper and the granddaughter of Byard Arkward.

As accomplished amateur storytellers, both pulled tales out of the folklore of Ireland, Scotland, west Africa and the Cherokee and Choctaw tribes -- among the cultures represented in her ancestry.

“My father was my favorite storyteller,” Ford said. “He shared lots of voices and rhythms and rhymes, and I think that’s the foundation of what I do.”

She later retold the stories as she raised her three children, since grown -- sons Ben Sharper and Brandon Ford, and daughter Bonnie Parrino.

“She was the best mom. She was always telling us stories,” said Parrino, of Ashtabula, Ohio.

“Some of them came with little life lessons. Now, when we visit, she sits down with my son (Andrew, 15) and tells him stories, and I love to sit back and watch it happen.”

Ford has plenty of chances to practice, with 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Her career takes her nationwide to tell stories at festivals.

She has done so, she said, in at least 25 states -- with her husband, Bruce, sometimes accompanying her.

About 15 years ago, Ford joined other area storytellers in founding Columbus Story Adventures -- to promote literacy among at-risk children.

Her appearance at Dowd -- a center, run by the Homeless Families Foundation, that provides after-school and summer programming -- contributed to the volunteer effort.

After about 40 minutes of stories, Ford offered a box of books and told each of the children to pick one.

“We can keep this?” one girl asked incredulously after choosing her book.

Telling stories, particularly to youngsters, “touches my heart,” Ford said.

“We were born for stories; our brains are hard-wired for stories,” she said. “This is how education and knowledge are shared, and one way to make a connection with people and cross any boundary is by sharing a story.”

kgordon@dispatch.com

[@kgdispatch](#)